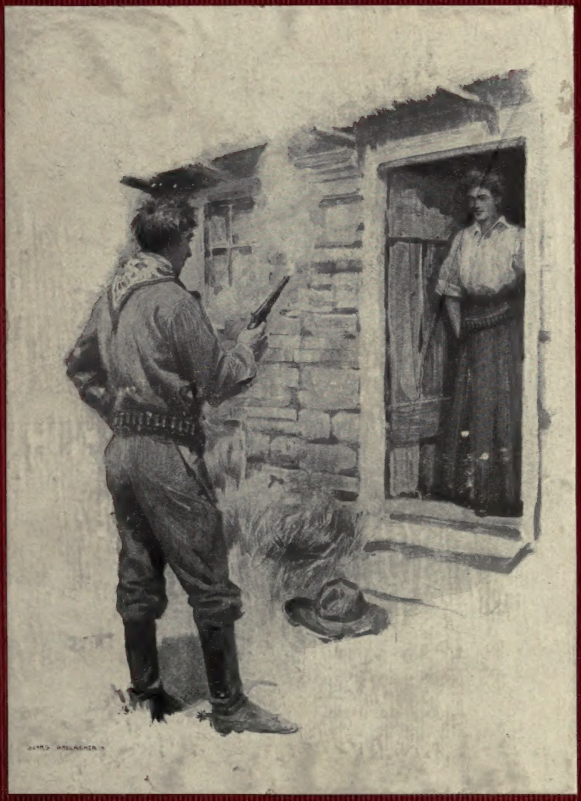
Nancy MacIntyre

A TALE OF THE PRAIRIES



LESTER SHEPARD PARKER

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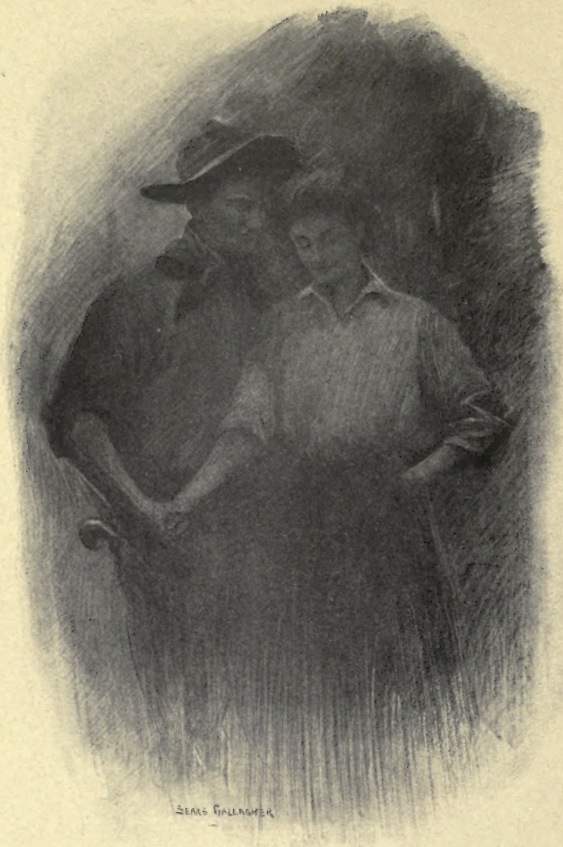

"I was takin' leave of Nancy,
Standin' out there in the night."

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Nancy MacIntyre

A Tale of the Prairies

LESTER SHEPARD PARKER

Illustrated by Sears Gallagher

BOSTON
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To My Wee Daughter

RACHEL ELLEN PARKER

this little story is

affectionately inscribed

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BILLY'S REVERY

1

No use talking, it's perplexing.
  Everything don't look the same.
Never had these curious feelin's
  Till those MacIntyres came.
Quit my plowing long 'fore dinner.
  Didn't hitch my team again;
Spent the day with these new neighbors,
  Getting 'quainted with the men.
Talk about the prairie roses!
  Purtiest flow'rs in all the world,
But they look like weeds for beauty
  When I think of that new girl.
Strange, she seems so kind of friendly
  When I'm awkward, every way,
And my tongue gets hitched and hobbled,
  Everything I try to say!

2

There's one person, that Jim Johnson:
  That there man I can't abide.
He's been milling around near Nancy,
  Durn his dirty, yaller hide!
Never really liked that Johnson;
  Now, each time I hear his name,
Feel this state's too thickly settled,—
  That is, since that new girl came.

If this making love to women
Went like breaking in a horse,
I might stand some show of winning,
'Cause I've learned that game, of course;
But this moonshine folks call 'courting,'
I ain't never played that part;
I can't keep from talking foolish
When I'm thinking with my heart.

3

Now, those women that you read of
In these story picture books,
They can't ride in roping distance
Of that girl in style and looks.
They have waists more like an insect,
Corset shaped and double cinched;
Feet just right to make a watch charm,
Small, of course, because they're pinched.
This here Nancy's like God made her.
She don't wear no saddle girth,
But she's supple as a willow,
And the purtiest thing on earth.
I'm in earnest; let me ask you —
'Cause I want to reason fair —
What durn business has that rope-necked
Johnson sneaking over there?

4

Hands so soft and strong and tender,
When I shook a " how de do,"
They was loaded sure with something
Seemed to thrill me through and through;
Hair as black as fire-burnt prairie,
Eyes that dance and flash and flirt;
Every time she smiled she showed you
Teeth as white's my Sunday shirt.
Baked us biscuits light as cotton;
I can't eat mine any more.
I must get some better breeches;
Kind o' 'shamed of those I wore,
But I'm goin' there to-morrow,
Like enough I'll stay all day.
Seems to me too dry for plowing.
Durn that Johnson, anyway!

5

I ain't much on deep-down thinkin',
Reasoning out the way things go,
So I s'pose I'll keep on foolin'
Till in time I get to know.
I've had chills and fever 'n' ague;
Suffered till their course was run;
Maybe love just keeps on runnin',
Till a man has lost — or won.

One thing certain: I have got it.
Seems to struck in good and hard.
Makes me sometimes soft and tender,
Next thing I would fight my pard.
Appetite is surely failing;
Sometimes I don't eat a bite;
Dream of Nancy all the daytime,
That durn Johnson half the night.

6

I've just got to get to plowin',
Break a fire-guard 'round my shack,
Plant my sod corn, fix my garden;
Everything is goin' to wrack.
I can't work the way I used to,
Got to quittin' early now,
Since a little thing that happened,
I can't just remember how.
I was takin' leave of Nancy,
Standin' out there in the night,
And I put my arms around her —
Heart stopped beatin', just from fright.
Can't express the kind of feelin';
Words wa'n't never made for this,
As I drew her face up closer,
And I stole my first sweet kiss.

THE QUARREL

1

Things have moved along some smoother
  Since a week ago to-night.
Seems my blood turned all to p'ison —
  Me and Johnson had a fight.
Caught him twice up there to Nancy's;
  Told him plain to stay away,
But he didn't seem to notice
  Anything I had to say.
Caught him settin' there and talkin'
  'Bout the things that he had done —
Durndest liar on the prairie —
  Laughing like he thought 'twas fun,
Settin' there beside o' Nancy.
  Settin' down is all he does,
Good for nothin', bug-eyed, loafin',
  Wrinkled, yaller, meddlin' cuss!

2

I just let him keep on settin'
  All the whole long evenin' through.
When he started off I follered,
  Told him what I meant to do.
" Why," says he, " now, don't git foolish;
  I ain't skeered o' your light breeze,
I'll go thar and set by Nancy,
  Spite o' you, when I blame please."

Well, I don't just clear remember
All the doin's that took place,
But you'll know the story better
If you'll look at Johnson's face.
As we rode we clinched and wrestled,
Then we tumbled to the ground.
Tore the bunch grass up, and cactus,
For a hundred yards around.

3

Got him down, and in the scrimmage
Felt my lasso on the ground,
Tied his legs and bent him over,
Bound him like he's sittin' down;
Hustled quick to mount my pony,
Threw the loose end round the horn,
Thought I'd learn that Mr. Johnson
He'd missed out in bein' born.
Then I dragged him on the prairie,
Through a Turk's Head cactus bed,
Prickly pears and shoestring bushes,—
'Twasn't decent what he said.
He's so dev'lish fond of settin',
Thought I'd fix his settin' end
So's he'd be more kinder careful
Settin' by that girl again.

"Then I dragged him on the prairie
Through a Turk's head cactus bed."

THE DISAPPOINTMENT

1

There's a feeling in my bosom,
  Like a hound that's lost the game,
After chasing over bunch grass
  Till his feet are sore and lame.
I am standing by her dug-out,
  Open stands the sagging door;
Every grassblade speaks of Nancy,
  But she's gone, to come no more.
For her father and her mother,
  And her brothers, late last night,
Loaded up their prairie schooner,
  And vamoosed the ranch, 'fore light.
'Taint no use to stand here cussin',
  But my heart slumps down like lead
When I think of losing Nancy
  And to know my dreams are dead.

2

It was here I held you, Nancy;
  When I showed you all my heart;
When I told you I would always
  Be your friend and take your part.
Oh, I thought that in life's lottery
  I had drawn the biggest prize,
When I kissed you there that evening
  And looked down into your eyes;

For I never had such feelin's
Fill my hide clean through and through —
Such a hungry, starving longing,
To be always close to you.
But you've gone with all your family,
And I'm left to mourn my loss,
While the posse hunts your daddie,
'Cause he stole Bill Kelly's hoss.

3

Now, I don't know where you're roaming,
And I don't know where'll you'll land;
But I wish you knew my feelin's,
And 'twas clear just how I stand:
How the good Lord, high in heaven,
Put a throbbing heart in here,
But it starts to pumping backwards
When it feels that you don't keer.
I'm a roving old jay-hawker,
Never caught like this before,
But I'd give my last possession
For a glimpse of you once more.
If we lose your old fool father
Folks 'round here can stand the loss.
He was raised in old Missoura,
Or he'd never stole that hoss.

"I am standing by her dugout,
Open stands the sagging door."

4

When my mind gets to recalling
All the happy times we had,
Good red liquor and tobacco
Gets to tasting kind o' bad.
You remember on your birthday
How I drove 'round kind o' late,
And we went to Donkey Collins'
To a dance, to celebrate?
When you got up in my wagon,
Bless my heart, you sure was sweet!
You was bound that you'd go barefoot,
'Cause your new shoes hurt your feet.
Well, I tell you, pretty Nancy,
Every minute of that ride
Seemed like floating through the heavens,
'Cause you set there by my side.

5

When we pulled up at old Collins',
Quite a bunch was there before.
You could hear the fiddler calling,
And the scraping on the floor.
Through the dingy sodhouse window
Gleamed a sickly yellow light,
Where I helped you from the wagon,
Holding you so loving tight.

Then they called out, " Choose your pardners,
Numbers five, six, seven, and eight,"
And we hustled up to join in,
For we knew that we were late.
After starting up the music
Something happened — you know what —
All because I loved you, Nancy,
And their manners made me hot.

6

I just glanced around the circle,
When we came to " Balance, all;"
To that mess of cowhide-covered
Feet that stomped at every call.
Sure enough, the thing I looked for
Come to pass when Aleck Rose
Tried to *dos-a-dos* by you, dear,
And, instead, waltzed on your toes.
Recollect? I stopped the fiddler,
And I stopped that stomping crowd,
Using language that was decent,
But was mighty clear and loud:
" Now, you fellers from the Sand Hills,
Fight me, or if you refuse
You don't dance with me and Nancy
While a one of you wears shoes! "

7

Yes, they took them off, Miss Nancy,
In respect for you and me,
Putting all on equal footing,
Just the way it ought to be.
And we went through all the figures
That we knew in that quadrille,
But it didn't seem like dancin',
Steppin' round so awful still.
Fiddler, even, did his calling
In a sort of quiet hush —
" Swing your pardners," " Back to places,"
" Sounds to me like paddlin' mush."
" Man in center," " Circle round him,"
" All join hands," and " 'Way you go,"
" Wait fur Betsy, she's in trouble,
With a splinter in her toe."

8

When I took you home, towards morning,
Such a night I never saw.
How the Kansas wind was blowing!
Swift and keen and kind o' raw.
Blew more furious every minute,
Blew a hole clear through the skies;
Blew so loud, like demons hissing,
That the moon was 'fraid to rise.

Got so fierce it blew the stars out.
Saw them flicker, then go dead,
While the blackness, mad and murky,
Rolled in thunder overhead.
Goin' with it, durn my whiskers!
Hind wheels riz plumb off the ground.
Goin' 'gainst it, you and me, dear,
Had to push the hosses down.

9

Now and then a raindrop whistled
Like a bullet past my head.
And I hollered out to you, dear,
"Scrooch down in the wagon bed."
Then they come as big as hen eggs;
Struck the hosses stinging raps,
Till the frightened, tremblin' critters
Leaped beneath the angry slaps.
Lord a' mighty, how they scampered!
While I gripped the lines in tight,
As the wagon box sailed upward
Like a mighty wind-borne kite.
Down below us ran the hosses,
While we floated through the air,
But through all that roaring shakeup,
You, dear, never turned a hair.

10

When the lightning flashed around us,
  Rabbits stopped to let us by.
Looked as if they said by halting,
  " We can't race with things that fly! "
Coyotes sneaked off in the slough grass,
  Prairie dogs stayed in their holes;
We was lubricated blazes;
  Couldn't stop to save our souls.
Up the hills we flew like swallows,
  Down the slopes, a hurricane;
Bumped and jumped the humps and hollows,
  Dragged the ground and riz again.
And I prayed, " Dear Lord, save Nancy,
  For a desperate lover's sake! "
You was hangin' to my gallus,
  And I felt it strain and break.

11

Felt you holdin' to my boot-leg,
  Slattin' in the roarin' gale,
So, to save you, I worked for'ard,
  Got the nigh hoss by the tail.
Miles on miles we tore on blindly,
  Had to let the critters roam,
Till, at last, they turned their noses
  To the north, and towards their home.

We went charging down a valley,
Stopped in something soft and deep.
Wagon box and you and me, dear,
Landed in a mixed-up heap.
Both the hosses' legs was buried
And I knew that that was proof
We had 'lighted on the top of
Old Jim Davis's dug-out roof.

12

Now, old Jim was sleeping soundly
Close beside his faithful wife;
Peace had smoothed his savage wrinkles,
All his dreams were free from strife.
He was safe from ragin' cyclones,
Wolves could never force his door,
All the ills of life had vanished,
On his mountain torrent snore.
So when our descent awoke him
Sitting bolt upright in bed,
With the flying hoofs above him,
Kicking hair off of his head,
He aroused his sleeping helpmeet;
Loud his curses and abuse,
" Mary, hike your lazy carcass,
Hell has turned the devil loose."

13

While ole Jim was shooting at us —
  Couldn't make him understand;
Kept his blamed old gun a-going
  Till he got me through the hand —
Not a whimper did you utter,
  But you grabbed the hosses' heads,
Coaxed and helped them in their trouble,
  While they strove like thoroughbreds,
Lunging, plunging, you stayed with them
  Till they both were clear and free.
Riding one, you lashed them forward,
  Circled round and picked up me;
Helped me mount, while Jim was loading;
  Then we struck off through the night,
Right across the storm-swept prairie,
  Till the East was streaked with light.

14

I was faint and sick and dizzy,
  From my shattered, bleeding hand,
And it seemed as if the jolting
  Gave me more than I could stand.
Once I reeled, and would have fallen,
  If you hadn't held me there.
Put your dear arm tight around me,
  Whispered, " Billy, don't you care."

Then you headed straight for water,
  Threw the lines, dismounted first,
Smoothed the grass down for my pillow,
  While the hosses quenched their thirst.
Then you bathed my throbbing forehead,
  Love and healing in the touch,
Sayin', " Billy, pardner, listen:
  That there shootin' wasn't much! "

15

From your skirt you tore a piece out,
  Dressed my wound so neat and quick,
That I felt the Lord had sent you
  Just to soothe and heal the sick.
Bringing back a hat of water,
  Through the dim light and the rain,
Thought I saw your face turn paler,
  Like you felt a twinge o' pain;
But as you knelt down beside me
  I could hear you humming low,
Some mysterious song, stopped short by,
  " Billy, man, we sure must go! "
And the sun turned loose his glory,
  Through the tempest-riven sky,
Till it touched us like a blessing
  From the Father there on high.

"Bringing back a hat of water,
Through the dim light and the rain."

16

I am standing by her dug-out,
Open swings the sagging door,
Every grassblade speaks of Nancy,
But she's gone, to come no more.
For her father and her mother,
And her brothers, late last night,
Loaded up their prairie schooner,
And vamoosed the ranch, 'fore light.
There's the bed poles and the stove hole;
Not a thing is left for me,
As a keepsake of my Nancy,
Anywhere that I can see.
What! a paper, pinned up yonder,
Kind o' folded like a note!
It has writin', sure as blazes!
It is somethin' Nancy wrote.

17

" My dere billy, you will wunder
Why I ever rote you this.
I am sorry I am leevin
Daddie needs me in his biz.
I don't reely like this quiet
Kind of sober farmer life.
I like something allus doin,
But for this, I'd be your wife.

I got two of old Jim's bullets,
  Didn't like to let you know,
Cause the one that you wus luggin'
  Seemed to fret and hurt you so.
Daddie cut them out that evenin;
  I don't mind a little such,
But, dere billy, don't you worry,
  Old Jim's shootin wasn't much."

THE DECISION

1

Since that girl went off and left me,
I can't plan just what to do.
Saw Tom Frothingham this mornin',
He says Johnson's gone off, too.
My old mother used to tell me,
When I lagged at any task,
" Keep on working, do no shirking,
You will bring the thing to pass."
That advice has been my motto:
Everything that I've begun,
I've stayed with it, sick or weary,
Till the job was squarely done.
But this case is kind o' different;
Though I ain't the kind that grieves,
How you goin' to work that motto
When the job gets up and leaves?

2

S'pose, in thinkin' and decidin',
I refuse to do my part;
Just sit down and let my mem'ry
Finish breaking up my heart.
S'pose I give up like a coward,
Let the world say I ain't game,
'Cause by leavin' I should forfeit
My poor eighty-acre claim.

I ain't 'fraid to do my duty
If I'm clear what it's about,
But this scrape is so peculiar
That my mind's smoked up with doubt.
I believe that Nancy loves me,
And it may be she'll stay true;
But I wonder why the blazes
That durn Johnson's gone off too.

3

Blamed if I don't get my hosses,
Saddle Zeb and lead old Si,
And we'll search the wind-swept prairie
Till we find that girl, or die!
Who'd a thought a man's whole future
Could get twisted up like this?
All his plans burn up like tinder
In the fire of one sweet kiss!
"Zeb, come here, and good old Simon —
Listen while I talk to you;
Put your noses on my shoulder
While I tell you what we'll do.
Your fool master's deep in trouble,
Can't explain to you just how,
But until we find my Nancy,
You shall never pull a plow."

THE SEARCH

1

In the West, where twilight glories
  Paint with blood each sky-line cloud,
While the virgin rolling prairie
  Slowly dons her evening shroud,
While the killdeer plover settles
  From its quick and noisy flight,
While the prairie cock is blowing
  Warning of the coming night —
There against the fiery background
  Where the day and night have met,
Move three disappearing figures
  Outlined sharp in silhouette.
Zeb and Si and Bill, the lover,
  Chafing under each delay
Pass below the red horizon,
  Toward the river trail away.

2

Far across the upland prairie
  To the valley-land below,
Where the tall and tangled joint-grass
  Makes the horses pant and blow,
There the silent Solomon River
  Reaching westward to its source,
With its fringe of somber timber
  Guides the lover on his course.

All the night he keeps his saddle,
Urging Zeb and Simon on,
Till the trail clears up before him
In the gray of early dawn.
Where it turns in towards the river,
Arched above with vine-growth rank,
He, dismounting, ties the horses
Near the steep and treacherous bank.

3

More than light and shade and landscape
Meet the plainsman's searching look,
For the paths that lie before him
Are the pages of his book.
Stooping down and reading slowly,
Noting every trace around,
Of the travel gone before him,
Every mark upon the ground,
Down the winding, deep-cut roadway
Furrowed out by grinding tire,
Where the ruts lead to the water,
In the half-dried plastic mire,
He beholds the telltale marking
Of an odd-shaped band of steel,
Welded to secure the fellies
Of old MacIntyre's wheel.

4

High above the wind is moaning
In a lonely, fretful mood,
Through the lofty spreading branches
Of the elm and cottonwood.
Where the willows hide the fordway
With their fringe of lighter green,
Is the dam, decayed and broken,
Where the beavers once have been.
On the sycamore bent o'er it,
With its gleaming trunk of white,
Sits the barred owl, idly blinking
At the early morning's light,
While within its spacious hollow
Where the rotting heart had clung
Till removed by age and fire,
Sleeps the wild cat with her young.

5

Plunging through the sluggish water,
Scarcely halting for a drink,
Toiling through the sticky quagmire
They attain the farther brink.
Here the trail leads to the westward,
Once the redman's wild domain,
Now the shallow rutted highway
Of the settler's wagon train.

Here and there along the edges,
Paths work through the waving grass,
Where at night from bluff to river,
Sneaking coyotes find a pass.
Here the meadow lark sings gaily
As she leaves her hidden nest,
While the sun of early morning
Double-tints her orange breast.

6

Up this broad and fertile valley
Tracing all its winding ways,
Plodding on with dogged patience
Through a score of weary days,
Camping in the lonely timber,
Sleeping on the scorching plain,
Bearing heat and thirst and hunger,
Sore fatigue and wind and rain —
Halting only when the telltale
Mark was missing in the track,
Only when he called a greeting,
As he passed some settler's shack;
Till the valley and its timber
Vanished, where the rolling sward
Of the westward-sweeping prairie
Marks the trail 'cross Mingo's ford.

7

Here for hours he searched the crossing
And the wheel-ruts leading on
To the north, a full day's journey;
But the guiding mark was gone.
Not a vestige here remaining
Of the sign that could be told,
For old Mac had traveled swiftly
And the trail was mixed and old.
Two whole days Bill searched and waited,
Hoping for some other clew,
Weighing questions of direction,
Undecided what to do.
Till, one night, while cooking supper
By the camp-fire's genial glow,
He was startled by a stranger's
Sudden presence and " Hello! "

8

Tall of stature, dark of visage,
By the wind well dried and tanned,
Clad in " shaps " and spurs that jingled,
With a bull whip in his hand.
Close behind him in the shadows,
Eyes aglow with red and green,
Stood a blazed-face Texas pony,
Ewe-necked, cat-hammed, wild, and mean.

" Hello, stranger! glad to see you.
Got my cattle fixed for night;
Just got through, and riding round 'em,
'Cross the bluff, I saw your light.
No, thanks, pardner; had my supper.
Seems your fire is short o' wood.
I just thought I'd see who's camped here;
Gee! that bacon does smell good! "

9

When the frugal meal was over,
When the pipes were filled and lit,
And the cowboy ceased his stories
Weak in moral, rank in wit,
Billy plied him long with questions,
Wording each with thought and care,
Lest his zeal for information
Should reveal his mission there.
" Tell me who you've seen go by here,
Just within the last few days;
What they had for teams and outfits,
How the country round here lays.
Have you seen a prairie schooner —
Old style freighter — pass this way?
Both wheel hosses white-nosed sorrels,
Lead team of a dun and gray? "

"He was startled by a stranger's Sudden presence and 'Hello!'"

10

" I remember some such outfit,
If I've got your idee right
Think they camped a mile below here
Week ago last Thursday night.
Pulled in sometime 'long 'bout sundown.
Turned their stock in yonder draw,
But an oldish sort of fellow
Was the only one I saw;
Rode a speckled chestnut pony
With a white star in his face;
Asked some questions 'bout the country,
'Bout the proper crossing-place.
Pulled out sometime long 'fore daylight.
Didn't see them when they passed,
But from all the indications
They was trav'ling pretty fast.

11

" Crossed right here where we are settin',
Saw their trail that very day;
Struck plumb north, and by my reck'nin'
Towards the north they'll likely stay.
North of here, by my experience,
He'll find grass that's mighty fine.
Chances are that he'll keep goin'
'Till he strikes Nebraska's line.

It was just the next day after
That my cattle scattered so;
Some strayed off 'way south to Jimson's,
One bunch in the bend below.
That's the day I met that feller —
Eyes so black he couldn't see —
Who kept pumpin' me with questions
Like you've just been askin' me.

12

" Asked about that prairie schooner.
Said that they was friends of hisn,
Like to wore me plumb to frazzles
With his everlasting quiz'n.
Rode a piebald, knock-kneed broncho,
Coat was battered, ripped, and torn.
He was yaller, long, and g'anted
Like a steer with holler horn.
An' you oughter seen his breeches!
He must sure be shy on sense.
Why, they looked like he'd been riding
On a bucking barb wire fence.
You won't meet him, 'cause I saw him
Coming back across this way,
Going eastward where he come from.
Took the back trail yesterday.

13

" Said he'd found the old man's outfit
  Moving westward on North Fork.
Can't remember all he told me,
  For he runs a heap to talk.
Said he'd found out what he wanted;
  Said he ' had a plan or two,
And the folks that knowed Jim Johnson,
  Knowed that he would put 'em through.'
Then there's others took the west trail;
  They go that way huntin' range;
Funny how folks when they come here
  Get to itchin' for a change!
I've been stayin' too confinin';
  Never left this herd but once.
I'm the oldest puncher round here;
  Been here over fourteen months."

14

Long before the sun had risen,
  While the night mist's ghostly veil
Hid from view the sloughs and hollows,
  Billy took the northern trail.
Through the sunflowers in the low land,
  Plodding over sandstone knolls,
Winding through the level stretches
  Dotted thick with treacherous holes

Where the prairie dogs sat chattering,
Bolt upright upon their mounds,
While the ground owls sought their burrows,
Startled by the warning sounds;
Stumbling into buffalo wallows,
Dug out in an earlier day
By the halting herds that rested,
Rolled and bellowed in their play.

15

Now and then the sheltered hillside
Waved its varicolored flowers
As a greeting to the trav'ler,
Solace to the toilsome hours.
Old Jack Rabbit hopped before him,
Then sat up, to watch him pass,
Dusky horned-toads scurried nimbly
Through the withered buffalo grass.
Here and there the buzzing rattler
Whirred a warning, head alert,
Then retreated from the snapping,
Stinging strokes of Billy's quirt.
Day by day the wild breeze flying,
With'ring in its scorching heat,
Hummed a tune to labored beating
Of the plodding horses' feet.

16

Day by day this panorama
  Passing slowly, dully by,
With the sun's brass disc high gleaming
  From a white and cloudless sky,
Sometimes drew fantastic pictures.
  Many a strange and gruesome sign,
Phantom trees and fairy castles,
  Blurred the far horizon line.
Then they'd vanish like the fancies
  Of a fever-smitten brain,
And returning, changed in outline,
  Elsewhere on the mighty plain
Would allure the eyesore trav'ler
  Till the very sky above
Seemed to mock with vague mirages
  Every surety of love.

17

When each weary day was over,
  Halting near some watering-place,
Bill unpacked his meager outfit,
  Turned the horses loose to graze.
Baked his varicolored dough-bread,
  On a fire of cattle chips,
Coffee made of green-scummed water,
  Nectar to his thirsty lips.

On the ground he spread his blanket
And reclining there alone,
Heard the swiftly sweeping breezes
Sing in dreary monotone
Strange wild anthems, weird and lonesome,
Like lost spirits floating by,
While afar in broken measure
Swelled the coyotes' yelping cry.

18

All the varied information
Gathered from the few he passed,
Some from herders, some from stragglers,
Gave the missing clew at last
As to where old Mac was heading;
For that telltale band of steel
Stamped along the endless roadway
Printed by the turning wheel,
Pressed its image on the memory
Of the settlers coming back,
Who, when questioned by the searcher,
Told him that the telltale track
Had begun to veer to westward
After crossing by the way
Leading up the North Platte River,
Where the sand wastes stretch away.

19

As he crossed this barren prairie's
Sweeping waste of poverty,
Billy paused beside the cripple
Of a wind-torn twisted tree,
Standing there, marooned forever,
Where its hapless seed had blown,
Miles on miles from forest neighbor,
Struggling out its life alone.
Here he stopped, with head uncovered,
Conscious of a strange appeal,
Yielding to the voiceless longing
Human hearts are bound to feel
When their lot is isolation,
And a field of sterile soil
Dwarfs and twists the struggling spirit
As the body bends with toil.

20

Here, that subtle, silent craving,
Which with life will never end,
Of the lonesome and the needy
For the comfort of a friend,
Drew the trav'ler to this tree waif,
And he spread his outfit near,
And they held that sacred converse
Which the soul alone can hear.

While the horses browsed the sage brush,
And the sun withdrew his light,
And the moon in mournful splendor
Ushered in the lonely night.
He lay down beneath the branches,
Wrapped in musings strange and deep —
Thoughts that bore him off in silence
O'er the placid sea of sleep.

21

In his dreams he saw a monarch
Decked in sumptuous array,
Seated on a throne of glory,
Bearing royal title, Day.
Then some mighty power higher
Thrust him from his gorgeous throne,
Turning all the realm to darkness,
And the world was left alone.
As the shades of gloom were spreading,
By strange flashing threads of light
He beheld in dim-drawn outline,
Charging madly through the night,
Phantom horse and girlish rider
Speeding on in reckless race,
Till she turned directly toward him
And he saw her fearless face!

22

With the journey's slow progression
Slipped away the summer days,
Merging with the sleepy beauty
Of the lazy autumn haze;
And the frosts and drought combining
Waged relentless battle there,
Withering up the scanty ranges,
Leaving all the country bare.
When he entered Colorado,
Following still the barren plain
Where for months the mocking heavens
Never spared a drop of rain,
Faithful Simon, weak and starving,
Following feebly in the track
Pulled upon his straining halter,
Groaned and fell beneath his pack.

23

Vain were all the kind entreaties,
Vain the simple nursing done
To relieve his palsied weakness;
Poor old Simon's course was run.
Billy spent the night beside him,
But with next day's early dawn,
With the east's first flush of scarlet
Simon's faithful soul passed on.

Then, with hands outstretched before him,
  Half remembering what was said
When a child he saw the sexton
  Sprinkle earth upon the dead —
" Dust to dust, and then to ashes —
  I forget the other part —
I can't say the words I want to,
  I can't think — all's in my heart.

24

" Over twenty years, old pardner,
  We have been companions true.
You have always kept your end up
  In the hardships we've gone through.
If we'd stayed, and I had never
  Seen her face or touched her hand,
We should still have been contented,
  On our little piece of land.
This strange spell won't let me falter,
  Though the chasing never ends;
Seems that nothing ever'll stop it,
  Sickness, death, or loss of friends.
Where this love will drive a fellow
  I ain't wise enough to tell.
Sometimes think it leads to heaven
  By a trail that runs through hell."

"Faithful Simon, weak and starving
Groaned and fell beneath his pack. . . "

25

Weeks thereafter, plodding northward
Crossing over Lodge Pole creek,
Threading Colorado's stretches —
Sandy deserts wild and bleak —
Where the sun wars on the living,
Struggling 'neath his blinding light,
Then resigns his work of ravage
To the chilling frosts of night;
Where the bleaching bones of horses
Here and there bestrew the plains,
Telling many a ghastly story
Of misguided settlers' trains —
Where the early frontier ranger
Marked the first trail to Cheyenne,
Billy, following its wand'rings,
Found the missing mark again.

26

Then the labored pace grew faster
As he passed each camping place,
Marking well the lessening distance
In the long-contested race.
Riding through Wyoming's foothills,
With their rugged summit lines
Stretched across the clear horizon,
Fringed with pointed spruce and pines,

He beheld, one early morning,
Rising slowly to the sky,
Smoke — the thin and gauzy column
Of a camp fire built close by;
And, on looking down the valley
With exultant, ringing cheer,
He beheld the prairie schooner
And the MacIntyres near.

27

On an open spot of grass land
Gilded by the rising sun,
Sloping sharply to the crevice
Where the mountain waters run,
Ike, reclining, watched the horses,
Now increased to quite a band,
While above him, in the timber,
Brother Bill, with gun in hand,
Held it poised in sudden wonder,
Half in attitude to shoot,
As he saw the coming rider,
Heard his loudly yelled salute.
Near an old abandoned cabin,
Huddled by the breakfast fire,
Resting calm in fancied safety
Sat the elder MacIntyre.

28

" You! Why, Billy, where d' you come from ?
What new game you playing now ?
If you're out on posse business
By the gods, jest start your row!
What you saying ? You are friendly ?
Wal, I'm glad to hear it's so;
And I s'pose you made the journey
Way out here to let me know!
Oh! you're talking 'bout our Nancy!
Now I just begin to see.
Set down, Billy; you are askin'
Something that sure puzzles me.
Nancy ain't like other women —
What I say may hit you queer,
But it's jest as well to tell you —
That there girl — she isn't here.

29

" Don't stampede your words, now, Billy.
Slow 'em down and let 'em walk.
Lord a'mighty, man! keep quiet!
Never heard such crazy talk!
Where's the girl ? Wal, let me tell you —
T'aint no use to take on so —
Where is Nancy ? P'r'aps in heaven;
I can't tell yer,— I don't know.

When we left last spring from Kansas,
Travelin' mostly in the night,
We was chased up by a posse.
Fourth day out we had a fight.
We had jest unhitched the hosses,
Making camp at Old Man's Creek —
Gimme some o' that tobacker,
I've been out for more'n a week.

30

" We had jest unhitched the hosses,
Nance was riding Kelly's mare,
When we heard them all a-comin'—
They had seen us pull in there.
Nancy said, ' I'll hold 'em, daddie,
Get the outfit over here,
And I'll trail you in the mornin'.
I will see they don't get near.'
It was in that heavy timber —
Growing dark and spittin' rain —
Where the creek runs to the eastward,
Makes that loop, and back again.
We was in a reg'lar pocket;
Creek banks made a kind of bluff
All around us, so it looked like
We was trapped there, sure enough.

31

" Wal, we had a time in movin'.
Things got mixed up in the rush;
Lead team broke a piece of harness
Pulling through the underbrush.
Then the wagon turned clean over,
But we drug her plumb across,
Hitched with ropes and other fixin's,
Usin' every extra hoss.
Wal, you never heard such shootin',
Bullets whizzin' everywhere.
Pumped 'em on us till it sounded
Like they had an army there.
Nancy stayed and cracked it to 'em,
Kind o' circlin' round and round.
I could tell the two six-shooters
She was usin', by the sound.

32

" You can bet we did some trav'lin'
All that night and all next day.
I could still a-hear the shootin'
After we was miles away.
I supposed we'd see the girl come
Ridin' up to us 'fore long,
That is — I was jest a-thinkin'—
If there wasn't somethin' wrong.

But, in spite of all our lookin',
Sometimes slackin' up our gait,
Always thinkin' we should see her
Every time we'd stop and wait,
We have never seen her, Billy,
And I own I'm balked a bit,
Fur I know that she's a critter
Made of nothin' else but grit.

33

" I wish I could go and find her,
But 'twould be too hot for me.
Long before I got back that fur
I'd be strung up to a tree.
So I've been a kind o' thinkin',
Since I see what's both'rin' you,
'Bout a thing — I hate to ask it —
That I'd like for you to do.
I don't think that girl has ever —
It sure hurts me, what I say —
But I'm sure that in the scrimmage
Nancy never got away.
Billy, you go back and find her.
You are all I've got to send,
You can sort o' fix things decent,
Where she is — in Old Man's Bend."

THE RETURN

1

Every life is but a journey,
  Trav'ling on from place to place,
Starting from the point God gave us
  With an ever-varying pace.
Outward, onward, spurred by motives
  In our wand'rings here and there,
Often led by hope alluring,
  Sometimes halted by despair.
But the life that travels farthest
  On that deeper strength depends,
For with love, there is no turning.
  When love dies the journey ends.

2

Back across the broken foothills,
  With a courage none can feel
Till the burning pangs of sorrow
  Turn the heart-strings into steel;
Back across the winter's playground,
  Tracing out the paths he trod,
With each muttered execration
  Ending in a prayer to God.

Blasts that howled with fiendish laughter,
By their loud derisive cry
Seemed to mock his labored progress
As they passed him swiftly by;
Icy, blizzard-driven snowflakes
Into ghost-like fancies whirled,
Painting on the barren canvas,
Gaunt Death battling for the world.

3

Back across the snow-strewn desert,
Fighting famine face to face,
Trusting to his horse to take him
To each former camping place.
Once Zeb stopped beside a snowdrift
With a loud and startling neigh;
Tried to tell his half-dazed master
Where his mate, old Simon, lay.
Passing on, he reached the border
Of Nebraska's whitened plain,
Where his mind in maudlin fancies
Yielded to the bitter strain,
As he saw far in the distance,
Like a battered mast at sea,
Once again the twisted branches
Of the lone and friendly tree.

"Once again the twisted branches
Of the lone and friendly tree."

4

" Git up, Zeb. Come, see! She's waving!
Waving there for you and me.
See her there, so white and pretty,
Standing by our friend, the tree!
Quit that stumbling! Now then, streak it!
Hit the gait you used to do
When we hired out for the round up
And you beat the first one through.
There she is! There's where I saw her
When we stayed there all that night.
Though 'twas dark, I saw her riding,
By those flashing threads of light;
She's been waiting! Oh, I left her
In this awful lonely place!
God forgive me! Nancy! hear me!
Oh, that face — that poor white face!"

5

One cold morning, old Zach Baxter,
Riding o'er this snowbound sea,
Saw a famished pony standing
Near a queer and lonely tree.
From his frost-encrusted nostrils
Came a plaintive whinny, low,
As the man rode up beside him
Struggling through the drifted snow.

When the old man tried to lead him,
He refused to turn away;
But he pawed the drift beneath him,
Where his stricken master lay.
And below the cold, white cover,
In a deathlike stupor deep,
Old Zach found a sorry stranger
Shrouded for his last long sleep.

6

Tearing at the ragged bundle
Lodged between the horse's feet,
Clutching at the frozen blanket,
Brushing back the crusted sleet,
Faithful in his rude endeavors,
Rousing by his loud commands,
Roughly shaking, turning, rubbing,
Zach breathed on his face and hands;
Till the stiffened limbs responded
And the closed eyes opened wide,
Dazed and puzzled at the stranger
Working fiercely at his side.
Billy felt the strong arms raise him,
Felt the Frost King's stinging breath
As he struggled, half unconscious,
In the wav'ring fight with death.

7

In the east, the sun dogs glistened
  Like tall shafts of marble, bright,
O'er the whitened grave of nature,—
  Ghostly spires of frozen light.
Flying frost flakes snapped and sparkled,
  Dancing in a wild display
Turning to a mist of diamonds
  As they mocked the newborn day.

8

Old Zach's pony bearing double,
  Reeking steam from every pore,
Reached at last the covered pathway
  Leading to the dug-out door.
With his arms clasped tight round Billy,
  Zach half dragged his helpless load
Through the lowly, mud-walled entrance
  Of his rudely-built abode.
There, upon the narrow bunk bed
  Spread with nondescript attire,
Zach enfolded him in wrappings
  While he started up a fire;
And no nurse, however skillful,
  Whatsoever her degree,
Ever gave more loyal service
  To a patient, than did he.

9

Poor and meager were the comforts
Of Zach's cave-like prairie home,
Permeated with the odor
Of the fresh-dug virgin loam.
Pungent wreaths of smoke, slow drifting,
Floated lazily above,
To the dried grass of the ceiling
From the cracked and rusty stove.
Willow poles athwart for rafters
Sagged beneath the dirt roof's strain,
And a piece of grease-smeared paper
Formed the only window-pane.
In the center, on the dirt floor
Stood a table-like affair
Fashioned from a wagon end-gate,
Where Zach spread his scanty fare.

10

There for weeks lay Billy, helpless,
Racked with mad'ning fever pains,
As the burning sun of summer
Scorches sere the desert plains.
Then he lay with cold, white features
And the feeble, scarce drawn breath,
As the silent winter prairie
Lies beneath its shroud of death.

Ofttimes when the raging sickness
Sent the hot blood to his brain,
He would point with frantic gesture
To the dingy window pane,
Calling in excited mutterings,
Eyes transfixed in frenzied fright —
" There she is! Now, can't you see her?
See her face there in the light! "

II

Then old Zach would try to soothe him
In his simple-hearted way.
" She won't hurt you," he would tell him,
" I'll go drive her clear away.
I've seen things — now listen, pardner —
Those things happened once to me
Once down there in old Dodge City,
Winding up a three weeks' spree.
What you see is jest a 'lusion,
'Cause you're crazy in your head;
When your thinker's runnin' proper
You'll find ' She ' is gone or dead.
There, now, pardner, see what this is!
Ain't it purty? Your tin cup.
Found a little pinch o' coffee.
That's the boy, now, drink it up! "

12

When the breeze of spring in whispers
  Stirred the withered bunch-grass plume,
Humming hymns of resurrection
  Over nature's silent tomb,
And the fleeing clouds of heaven,
  Bending low at God's command,
Spilled their tribute from the ocean
  On the long forsaken land,
And the sun, with mellow kindness
  Spread abroad his softened rays,
With their magic power throbbing
  Through the heart of lengthened days,
Billy heard, at last, the music
  Of the glad earth's jubilee,
Felt a new strength stir within him,
  And a longing to be free.

13

One day, o'er the hill's low summit,
  Whence the prairie dipped away,
There appeared a moving wagon
  With its canvas patched and gray,
Like a vessel on the ocean
  Under taut and close-reefed sail,
Rising slowly on the billows
  Heaped up by the driving gale.

Veering towards the little dug-out,
Making for a friendly shore,
Heaving to, the schooner anchored
Close beside the open door.
Loud and hearty were the greetings,
For the driver of the team
Was Tom Frothingham, a neighbor,
Who had lived near Billy's claim.

14

Bit by bit he told the story —
How he'd wandered all around
Since he left his Kansas homestead
And the folks near North Pole mound;
How he'd traveled all through Texas
With the roving fever on,
Camping oft in strange new places,
Where no other soul had gone.
So the news, now half forgotten
In his absence from the place,
Came in broken recollections —
Careful efforts to retrace
All the incidents of interest
To the sick one listening there,
Who, with pale and careworn features,
Heard the story with despair.

15

" Three weeks after you left Kansas
I hitched up and came away.
Still, I reckoned you intended
To improve your claim and stay;
For your eighty was a picture —
Running spring and good clear land —
Everything a body needed
For a starter, right at hand.
Well, some others left 'fore I did.
You remember Mac, of course,
How he got the moving notion
When Bill Kelly missed his horse?
Chased him clear to Old Man's crossing,
So I heard the posse say.
Thought they had him fairly cornered,
But, by jings! he got away.

16

" There are stranger things than fiction;
What is natural may seem queer,
So I s'pose we needn't wonder
At the things we see out here.
One thing happened since you left there
That I call a burning shame —
Did you know that rope-necked Johnson
Jumped your eighty-acre claim?

Last I saw him, he was plowing,
And he laughed and tried to joke;
Said 'twas kind of you to leave him
All the ground that you had broke;
Said your house was so untidy
He was sleeping out of doors,
Till he got a girl to help him
Wash the pans and scrub the floors.

17

" Lots of people coming in there
From most every foreign land —
Massachusetts and Missouri —
Made a mess I couldn't stand.
Every man that's made of manhood
Wants to live where he is free,
So I'm bound to keep on moving
When they get to crowding me.
Then another thing that happened:
Puzzled every one around
When they heard one morning early,
That Bill Kelly's horse was found.
Aleck Rose told me about it
After I had packed and gone;
Said the mare strayed in the dooryard
With Mac's steel-horn saddle on."

18

As each day in steady conquest
Charged the ranks of fleeing night,
Winning back the stolen hours
With their golden spears of light;
As the living in all nature
Felt that mighty spirit's sway,
So the sick man caught the power
And his illness wore away.
One clear morning, as Aurora
Silver-tinted all the plain,
In his weatherbeaten saddle
Billy took the trail again.
" Good by, boy," old Zach repeated,
" I'm most sure you'll never see
Any more o' them 'ere 'lusions,
Any way, what you called ' She.' "

19

Day by day the low horizon
Spread its narrow circle round,
As if fate had drawn a barrier,
And forbade advance beyond.
Though the journey dragged on slowly,
Night time brought its sure reward,
For the added miles behind him
Stretched at length to Mingo's Ford,

Where the breeze bore from the upland
  Broken fragments of the song
Of the cowboy with his cattle,
  As he drove the strays along;
Where the voice of flowing water
  And the treble of the birds,
Swelled the hallowed evening anthem
  To the bass of lowing herds.

20

Then the trail along the Solomon
  Where the timber, making friends
With the ever-widening valley,
  Filled the rounded river bends;
Then the rankling reminiscence,
  As he passed some well-known place
Where before, with hope and vigor,
  He had sped in fruitless chase.
Then the lonely camp at nightfall,
  Where the wind in monotone
Thrummed the harp strings of the grass stems,
  Breathing low its song, " Alone! "
Where the stars, fixed in the heavens,
  To his upturned face would say,
With their heartless glint of distance,
  " She thou seek'st is far away."

21

Then the long, far-reaching bottoms
  Rank with withered blue-joint grass,
With its broken stems entangled
  In a matted jungle mass;
Then across the higher prairie,
  Searching out a shorter way,
To the creek that joined the river
  Where Mac crossed and got away;
Then the twinge of bitter sorrow
  As he neared his journey's end,
And beheld the fringe of timber
  On the banks of Old Man's bend;
Where no living sign or token
  Broke the gloom that brooded there,
Save a solitary buzzard
  Floating idly in the air.

22

From these high and broken hilltops
  He could trace the river's flow,
And the creek's untamed meandering,
  With its looplike bend below,
Seeming in the light of evening
  Like a giant serpent there,
Which had coiled about its victim,
  And lay resting in its lair.

Breaking through the tangled brushwood
As the night was coming on,
Creeping down the steep embankment
Where the muddy waters run,
Billy crossed within the timber
Where the shroud of deeper gloom
And its chilling breath of darkness
Marked the hidden prairie tomb.

23

As the soul in deep communion,
Seeks some isolated bower
Where the body's sordid cravings
Yield beneath the spirit's power,
So the searcher, bowed in reverence,
Left untouched his evening fare
As he listened to the voices
Of the shadows gathering there.
Here no lighted torch or camp fire
With its weak and fitful ray,
Could illume the mystic journey
Of prayer's consecrated way.
Here the silence brought its message
Of forebodings, vague and deep,
In its visions to the dreamer,
Through the mystery of sleep.

24

In his dreams he saw a monarch
Decked in sumptuous array,
Seated on a throne of glory,
Bearing royal title, Day.
Then some mighty power higher,
Thrust him from his gorgeous throne,
Turning all the realm to darkness,
And the world was left alone.
As the shades of gloom were spreading,
By strange flashing threads of light
He beheld in dim-drawn outline,
Charging madly through the night,
Phantom horse and girlish rider,
Speeding on in reckless race,
Till she turned directly toward him
And he saw her fearless face.

25

Then, behold! the King returning
With a pageantry so bright,
That the shadow-clad usurpers
Fled in ignominious fright.
As he saw the hosts approaching
Through a cloud of battle smoke,
Charging wildly down upon him,
He, in sudden fear, awoke.

As he looked, the blackened heavens
Splashed with demon-tinted blood
From the hue of burning prairie
Throbbed above the fiery flood.
Leaping o'er the rounded bluff-tops,
Down the valley's long incline,
He could see the lurid column
Spread its blazing battle line.

26

Like a troop of charging horsemen
Sweeping on with maddened roar,
Mowing down the grass battalions,
Crackling flames swept all before.
Then the driftwood's rifted breastwork,
Left there by the waters high,
Flashed up in a hissing furnace,
As the red-armed fiends leaped by.
Clinging to the swaying saddle
And the plunging horse's mane,
Billy dashed through falling embers
To the level, open plain.
On the right and left, the head fires
Rushing on at furious pace,
Stretched beside the horse and rider
In the life-and-death-fought race.

27

Here the gale with venomed fury
Met in vortex from afar,
Raising high the flaming pennons
Of the fiery fiends of war.
Flashing by, the blazing grass stems
Sped like arrows through the air,
Falling on the distant prairie,
Kindling fresh fires everywhere.
Pressing through the low-flung smoke clouds—
Stifling fumes of Hades' breath —
Fiercer with each flying moment
Drove those scorching blasts of death.
Thrice his horse, 'neath quirt and rowel
Bravely struggling, almost fell,
As he fled in desperation
O'er the trail that led through hell.

28

One poor singed and panting coyote
Through the perils of the ride
Hemmed in by pursuing fires
Ran close by the horse's side.
Scarce a meager pace behind them,
Pressing hard the coyote's rear,
Raced a frantic old jack rabbit,
Ears laid low in speed and fear.

"Fiercer with each flying moment
Drove those scorching blasts of death."

As they reached a stretch of upland,
Here the coyote changed his course,
Breaking through the narrow side-fire,
Followed by the hare and horse;
Where, upon the smoking prairie
Over which the fire had passed,
Beast and horse and stricken rider
Found a refuge place at last.

29

When the morning sun resplendent
Cheered the gloomy, blackened plain,
He revealed the toil-worn lover
Back at Old Man's Bend again.
Waist deep in its soothing waters
Bathing blistered brow and hands;
While near by, in pain a-tremble,
Zeb with faithful patience stands.
Through the bend he searched and wandered,
But except the furrowed bark,
Of a gnarled and aged elm tree
Which revealed one bullet-mark,
Naught was left save blackened embers;
And the words he " knew in part "—
" Dust to dust and then to ashes "—
Told the story of his heart.

30

Back along the Solomon River,
Trailing towards the humble claim
He had lost when love and duty
Fired his soul to " being game ";
Back, across the beaver fordway,
Where love first had found the track,
Now returning with the rankling
Sting of hate to bring him back —
Hate, that hunger made more bitter
When his last jerked beef was gone;
Climbing trees to cut off branches
For his horse to browse upon;
Back, where once the flower-decked prairie,
Spread its bloom of hope and bliss,
Now a blackened field of mourning,
From the fire of one sweet kiss.

31

Till one day, he saw beyond him,
In the distance, purple crowned,
That old monarch of the prairie,
Guard of ages, North Pole mound.
Then the field where Zeb and Simon
Pulled the old sod-breaking plow
Stretching like a narrow ribbon
On the land that lay below.

Then it seemed the horse stepped faster
As he passed each well-known sign
Of the old familiar landscape,
And they crossed the eighty's line,
Where the spring of running waters
Gave envenomed purpose birth,
As he drank its bubbling offering
From the pulsing heart of earth.

32

Riding, then, up from the hollow,
Full before his eyes appeared
Home — his home — the low-walled sod house
Which his toiling hands had reared.
Near the straw shed stood the wagon
He had brought from Wichita,
And beneath the grass-fringed gable
Hung his trusty crosscut saw.
In the dooryard, near the window,
Lay the broken homemade chair,
Where, at evening, love-born fancies
Revelled, as he rested there;
Love, whose scattered seed had fallen
On a mystic field of fate,
Where the tangled vine extending
Bore the bitter fruit of hate.

33

Hurrying nearer, he dismounted,
Trembling with the rage he felt,
As he cast aside the bridle
And drew taut his cartridge belt.
Throwing down his torn sombrero,
There, before the tight-closed door,
On the cowardly usurper
Loud and bitter vengeance swore.
" Come, you dirty, green-scummed scoundrel,
With your sneaking ' plan or two' !
Just come out, you rope-necked buzzard!
See how far you'll put them through.
You can keep the eighty acres,
Hell will write your pedigree,
But I'll rub your crooked nose-piece
In the dirt you stole from me.

34

" Come outside, you sneaking coyote!
If you've got a drop of man
In your greasy, thieving carcass,
Finish up what you began."
Fiercer grew his coarse invective,
Louder yet his taunting calls.
When no answer to his challenge
Came from out the low sod walls.

Uncontrolled, his furious anger
  Spoke in quick and murderous roar
As he pumped his old six-shooter
  Through the barred and bolted door.
When he paused the rude door opened,
  And before its splintered place
Stood the vision of the shadows,
  And he saw Her fearless face.

35

As the artist in his painting
  Plans the background to enhance
All the beauty of his subject
  Both in pose and countenance
So the poor and dark interior
  Lent its gloom to magnify
All the power and witching beauty
  Of her face and lustrous eye.
Standing there, a pictured goddess
  Sketched against a lowering storm,
Bearing on her pallid features
  That supernal gift of calm.

36

" Nancy! Woman! God in heaven,
Speak, girl! Can this thing be true?
Are you here with that — that scoundrel,
After all that I've gone through?
Do you stand there, fiend or human,
After lending him your hand,
First to break an honest spirit,
Then to steal away my land?
Must a man who loves a woman
Like a devil's imp be driven
Through the tortures of damnation
For a single glimpse of heaven?
Tell me where the cur is hiding,
I've no wish to hurt his bride,
But I'll braid a twelve-foot bull whip
From his dirty, yaller hide!

37

" Speak to me and tell me, woman,
How the God in heaven above
Starts the fires of hell a-burning
From a spark of human love;
Why He ever made a woman
Who could play a fickle part;
Why He ever made a fellow
With his soul tied to his heart;

" Standing there, a pictured goddess
Sketched against a lowering storm."

Why He made life just a gamble.
I can't talk the way I feel;
In the game that I've been playing,
You know this ain't no square deal!
I will go away and leave you,
But 'twould kind o' ease the pain
If you'd only tell me, Nancy —
If you'd try — to — just explain.

38

" If you wouldn't stand there looking
Like that ghost of endless night
That I saw there on the prairie
With a face of livid white,
Riding through the endless darkness
Like a being doomed from birth
Just to roam outside of heaven
And denied a place on earth.
Say one word to me! Speak, Nancy,
If you have a voice and live!
Tell the worst, e'en though you ask me
To be patient and forgive.
I will listen — I will suffer —
I will do the best I can.
Nancy, sweetheart! hear the pleading
Of a broken-hearted man."

39

" See here, Billy! You gone crazy?
Charging like you got a fit?
Johnson ain't in — just at present,
Won't you stop and rest a bit?
Don't act strange. There's no hard feelings,
Though I've never seen before
Any man that knocked like you did
On a peaceful neighbor's door.
Come right in; now, don't be backward.
Like old times to have *you* 'round!
You look tired, like you'd traveled
Over quite a stretch of ground.
Sit right here in this old rocker;
Johnson fixed it up one day,
Feeling certain you would never
Come meandering 'round this way.

40

" Don't get up and act uneasy,
Rest yourself, now, if you can,
You don't mind me like Jim Johnson.
He's a most obedient man.
You went off and left your eighty,
Roaming where the luck-wind blows,
Like a tumbleweed in winter,
Where you've been, Lord only knows.

While Jim's gone we'll talk together,
As we used to, months ago,
When I tried to quench the burning
Of a love I didn't know.
Listen, Billy, while I tell you
All about my 'fickle part.'
When I'm done you may know better
How God made a woman's heart.

41

"While you're resting, I'll get supper,
Though there ain't much here to eat,
'Cepting bran, to make some muffins,
And a little rabbit meat.
Wish I had that pinch of coffee
I saved up for — oh, so long,
Till one day I went and used it,
Though I somehow felt 'twas wrong;
For I kind o' thought that sometime
Some one might be coming here
Worn out with a long, long journey,
And would crave that kind o' cheer.
Now, then, Billy, draw your stool up;
What we've got is scant and plain —
I ain't hungry — honest — Billy,
While you eat — why — I'll 'explain.'"

NANCY'S STORY

1

" I went off and left you, Billy,
'Cause I'm used to being free,
And I love my dear old daddie —
He has been so good to me.
Ever since I learned to toddle
We've been living on the run,
And my first and only playthings
Were a saddle and a gun.
When I went away with daddie,
After trav'ling nigh a week,
We were caught up by the posse
In the bend on Old Man's Creek.
Think I'd let them take my daddie?
No: I held them all at bay,
While the boys hitched up the horses,
Crossed the creek and got away.

2

" I just told them I would follow
After all the fuss was through,
But instead, all night I wandered,
Thinking all the time of you;
For when we were last together
You cast over me a spell
That just seemed to change my nature,
In a way that words can't tell;

For it left a fire a-burning
Like a live and glowing coal,
That at length blazed into longing
Till I craved with all my soul
To be back, somehow, where you were,
And to hear you tell once more
That you loved me. That man-story
I had never heard before.

3

" Then I trailed back o'er the prairie,
Riding steady every night,
Picking out the wildest country
With my luck to guide me right.
When I'd see the hungry morning
Eat the stars up in the East,
I would hide in gulch or timber
Like a wild and hunted beast.
How I learned to love the darkness
As it spread its mighty arm,
Close around me, like a lover,
Fondly shielding me from harm!
And I knew the sweet caresses
Of the earth and sky above,
As the night's mysterious voices
Soothed me with their tale of love.

4

" Then I'd ride like forty devils
Just to catch upon my face
All the kisses which the tempest
Pressed upon me in the race.
How I thought of poor old daddie,
Who, perhaps, I'd never find
If I went clear back to your place,
Which would leave me weeks behind!
I could hardly bear the burden
When I'd think of — both of you.
But that fire you set a-burning,
One night told me what to do.
I would see and ask you, Billy,
If you wouldn't go with me
Where we both could be with daddie,
Way out West, where he must be.

5

" Then at last the night that loved me,
Turned its spiteful furies loose,
Roaring out on me its anger
And unpitying abuse.
How the rain beat down upon me!
How the lightning burned its track
Through the battlefields of hunger,
As I reached your sod-walled shack!

All was dark within, and quiet,
When I rapped upon the door.
Then I saw the flash of matches
And the lamplight on the floor;
Heard you stomp your heavy boots on,
Heard you walk and draw the bar,
But the door, when thrown wide open,
Showed Jim Johnson standing thar.

6

" 'What you doing here?' I shouted,
When I saw his hateful leer.
' Tell me what this means, Jim Johnson.
Where is Billy? Ain't he here?'
He was standing on the doorstep,
And the light that shone within
Seemed to twist his wrinkled features
In a sort of wonder-grin.
' Well! well! Nancy! sure's I'm livin'!
Out there in the pouring wet!
Sure I'll care for you, Miss Nancy,
I'll protect you, don't you fret!
I'm a friend that you can count on,
Does me good to see your face!
Come in, gal, and dry your garments,
You have struck the very place!'

7

" You don't blame me, do you, Billy,
If I did go in and stay,
Warming by your stove and fire,
Just to hear what he would say?
I will try to tell his story
As he told it, if I can,
Putting in what I remember
Of his ' interesting plan.'
' Now, then, gal, I heard you calling
As you stood there in the dark,
On a fellow, named Bill Truly,
But you shot 'way off the mark.
Billy ain't here now, and further,
He won't be here, you can bet;
Anyhow, that's what he told me
Two weeks past, when we last met.

8

" 'When your folks all skipped the country
I decided I'd move, too.
Thought perhaps you'd get in trouble
And I'd try to help you through.
I got in beyond the posse,
Rode like fire upon your track,
Found your dad, and *you* not with him;
So I turned and came right back.

Riding home along the Solomon,—
For the truth I pledge my word —
I met Billy with his horses
Three miles east of Mingo's Ford.
Stopped and shook my hand and told me
He was so far on his way
To a ranch 'way up in Utah,
Where he'd made his plans to stay.

9

" 'Said he wanted to be friendly,
So the things that he had left,
If I cherished no hard feelings,
I could look on as his gift.
" If you come across Miss Nancy
You can say to her for me,
That I've got another sweetheart,
And that she is wholly free."
Billy'd never do to tie to.
He's too fickle, gal, for you,
So I just propose to offer
You a man that will stay true.
I have worked it out, Miss Nancy —
It's the problem of my life:
I have planned that you shall stay here
As my own dear little wife.'

10

" 'Look here, Johnson! You're a liar,
When you say he's set me free!
When you met him there at Mingo's
He had gone to hunt for me.
Don't you dare to touch me, scoundrel!
Don't you dare to slur his name!
You're a cur — a thief — Jim Johnson!
You have jumped my sweetheart's claim.
Don't you dare to venture near me!
Or you'll wish you'd not begun.
All your schemes and double dealings,
All your hatched-up plans are done.
You start now and pack your fixin's!
Don't you leave the smallest bit!
Every filthy thing you own here,
Pack it up — you dog, and *git!*'

11

" He was standing there uncertain,
And I felt to clinch his throat;
But, instead, I shot — to scare him —
All the buttons off his coat.
Then I pumped two in the corner,
Where he'd sunk upon his knees —
Slit his ear and cut his collar,
Never listening to his pleas.

Told him if he didn't mosey
I would plant his carcass whole,
In a grave I'd dig that evening
On the eighty he had stole.
Then he promised, but I chased him
'Way across the old Saline,
And so far as I have knowledge,
He has never since been seen.

12

" When I got back here 'fore morning,
Thought of having Kelly's mare,
So I rode her to his stable
And I left her standing there.
For I knew that you'd consider
'Twas the proper thing to do,
If you came back here and found me
Holding down your claim for you.
But I felt right sorry, Billy,
When I looked around next day,
In the box there in the corner
Where the pans and dishes lay;
For in fixing for my breakfast,
My! the crockery was slim!
More than half of it was busted
By the bullets fired at Jim.

"But, instead, I shot, to scare him,
All the buttons off his coat."

13

" I forgot to tell you, Billy,
That for thirteen months or more,
You're the only man that's ever
Crossed the threshold of that door.
I have stayed alone and waited,
Full of faith that you would come,
So that I — might go to daddie,
And that you'd — have back your home.
Though perhaps I've sometimes suffered
From the cold and from the heat,
And I've gone for days together,
Here, without a bite to eat,
'Twasn't hunger of the body
That I craved to satisfy,
I was starved for — you — and daddie,
As the weary weeks trailed by.

14

" How I tried to think and reason
Why the fire from one caress
Turned my burning, yearning spirit
To a cinder of distress.
Some one told me, I remember,
Long ago when I was small,
God made every star up yonder,
Everything — the world and all.

Then I thought that in His workshop,
Up there in the heavens above,
He had made that curious hunger
Of the heart that we call love.
P'r'aps my troubles and the waiting
Stirred me to this queer-like whim;
But I couldn't help it, Billy,
I just had to talk to Him.

15

" In the night, when God wa'n't busy
And could hear the slightest sound,
I would venture from my hiding
To the top of North Pole Mound.
I was sure He'd never let His
Angels come out this-a-way,
But would use the wind to carry,
Prayers out here, that people pray.
So I'd hold my hands, and stopping
Gusts that tried to struggle free,
Tell them this here simple message
They must take to you from me:
' Please, dear God, won't you tell Billy
That I'm holding down his claim ?
He don't come 'cause he's in trouble.
Thank you, God. He ain't to blame.' "

16

Long before her honest story
  Faltered to its hallowed close,
Pushing back his untouched supper,
  Tremblingly her guest arose.
Vain for him to curb emotion,
  Or to stammer out his praise
Through a storm of rude devotion,
  Cast in halting human phrase.
Vain for him to frame a message
  Never meant for words to tell,
At the joy of reaching heaven
  By that trail that led through hell.
But his fervent benediction
  Was a passionate embrace,
And the Amen love's own ending,
  As he kissed her fearless face.

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Parker, Lester Shepard
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